

Why Philosophy is Important for Administrators in Education

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The fact that “philosophy,” to many people, is just a mysterious word that brings to mind images of white beards and mysticism is no surprise. Contemporary society seem to have little reason to value a field devoted to ideas rather than production. Simply, philosophy is impractical, a distraction from the important world of growing an economy and living real life. What, perhaps, is more surprising is that philosophy is now, also, a dying field within academia itself. As research and inquiry becomes more specialized, there is little reason to indulge the pedantic meanderings of those who do not wish to do something. Educational practitioners, in particular, have little reason to worry about philosophy when they are busy trying to help students. It takes only a brief moment, though, of reflection on a few major thinkers in philosophy to realize that education has never left the world of philosophy and is in great danger of failing to do the best it can for students if practitioner’s knowledge of philosophy is passing at best. This work discusses the importance of a knowledge of both Plato and Locke to effective policymaking in education contemporarily and warns practitioners of the danger of practice without theory.

It probably comes as no surprise that, at least as an official discipline in academia, philosophy is a dying field. The heavy emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in education, as well an emphasis on education for the purpose of job training, has left the liberal arts in a tenuous position. Philosophy, in particular, does not seem relevant to education today. It is hard to justify the importance of philosophy for educators when philosophers cannot seem to justify effectively the importance of philosophy for students. The comic realization, of course, is that all policy is grounded in some philosophical notion, whether it be in regards to the purpose of education, obligations to students, or the best interest of a nation. As such, philosophy remains essential in educational administration and leadership.

How is it that philosophy is important? Obviously, there are numerous conceptual benefits to the practice of philosophy. However, these benefits, such as improved critical thinking, flexible problem solving, and inquiry-based learning are benefits that may not be limited to philosophy itself. Moreover, in an age in which practicality rules, it has become essential that one demonstrate concrete examples when justifying the worth of a thing. Here, in this paper, two such examples are provided using John Locke and Plato. In exploring the

thoughts of these two philosophers, one comes to see the importance of understanding philosophy when making policy decisions.

While it is likely that we all have at least a passing awareness of Plato and are willing to acknowledge that his work is somehow seminal to our fields of knowledge today, we are often hard-pressed to justify why he matters on a practical level. His work, though, continues to inform and guide educational practice. And, if nothing else, it remains a reverberatory warning to us of the dangers of education and miss-education. Similarly, John Locke's work continues to guide educational practice, particularly in the United States. –So much that it is likely impossible to separate the principles that undergird our thinking about education from Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*.

This is all to say that if one wishes to develop policy, take action, and *lead*, then one must know *why* one does what one does. The way we think about education, its purpose, worth, and merit are all philosophical issues. If we are wary of education and its power as an indoctrinatory device then we are relying upon Plato's work. If we, rather, believe that education is about the empowerment of individuals, who themselves are essentially economic beings, then we are relying on John Locke. The practical import, though, for educational administrators may not be as much a matter of awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of one's beliefs as the warnings that are provided by the thinkers who developed the theories themselves. It does not take long to realize, upon examination, that the messages emerging from examination of Plato and Locke are dire warnings about the choices we are making in education today.

The *Republic* and Education

Plato's *Republic* is generally thought of as a book about government. As a text, it is well known as a scathing criticism of democracy. Plato went through great pains to describe his perfect city, which--as it turns out--seems rather fascist. What is under-discussed is the tremendous amount of time that he gives to education in the text. In fact, in many ways, it seems that the *Republic* is more about education than it is about government. While the text does address the pitfalls of various forms of government, it spends much more time discussing the importance of developing a flourishing soul. That flourishing, Plato argued, is developed through indoctrination in youth. One quickly realizes that what makes Plato's *Republic* seem so very oppressive is the heavy emphasis he places on education as a means of control.

Plato argued for the necessity of education in music, gymnastics, mathematics, and dialectics. This education, though, was specifically oriented to those who were being groomed to govern the city. This is not to say that Plato does not discuss education of all of the city's citizens, but that their education is based, heavily, on their future role in the city. The city itself is populated by different groups: the rulers, the warriors, and the producers, each of whom must meet their particular obligations within the community. Their education is not just a matter, though, of making sure that the citizen knows how to perform a particular job—of greater importance to Plato was that their education helps prevent them from taking advantage of their power. This prevention, in part, takes place *through the development of a flourishing morality*. Plato wrote, “The object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful” (*Rep.* III.403). Thus, those who are sufficiently well educated love beauty, and, thereby, love justice. Without this education, though, the basic tendency of humans to be violent and greedy may dominate the individual.

It is precisely the human capacity for greed and violence that led Plato to his argument that the city itself should be ruled by individuals who do not want to rule, are educated to be moral agents, and are not allowed to become wealthy. That moral education requires that the young are not exposed to music or stories that may corrupt them—specifically stories of violence, immorality, or law breaking. Plato argued that children are profoundly impressionable and will absorb the message, hidden or otherwise, of stories that encourage us to act violently or break the law. Thus, it is education, specifically, that can act as a bulwark against tyranny and social violence both internally and externally. Similarly, education can, by exposing students to violence, immorality, and law breaking that can lead a society to corruption.

Therefore, Plato argued that democracy is antithetical to effective education for the purpose of a flourishing society. Democracy, rather, is rule by mob—often, undereducated mob. The human tendency towards violence and greed results in the inevitable collapse of democracy into tyranny. Plato wrote, “There is in every one of us, even those who seem to be most moderate, a type of desire that is terrible, wild, and lawless” (*Rep.* IX. 572b). It is imperative, then, that we are educated to suppress those qualities, and those of us who cannot are not allowed to rule. It is important to note that it was Plato's own teacher, Socrates, who acts as the mouthpiece of Plato's argument in the *Republic*. Moreover, it was Socrates who was executed by the very Athenian democracy that Plato so heavily criticizes. —A democracy that had become so

corrupt, abused by wealthy and power hungry citizens, and that was regularly susceptible to collapse and rule by tyrants.

This is all to say that Plato makes a case that remains particularly cogent for educational leaders now. In a society in which the focus of education is quickly becoming the placement of students in particular jobs, one must ask if education will act to benefit or harm society. We exist in a society not so different from that of Athens at the time of Socrates and Plato. Plato was particularly aware of the danger of democracy, especially when governed by a populace that was not well-educated. Note, though, that this education is not just indoctrinatory. Plato wrote,

That's what education should be... the art of orientation. Educators should devise the simplest and most effective methods of turning minds around. It shouldn't be the art of implanting sight in the organ, but should proceed on the understanding that the organ already has the capacity, but is improperly aligned and isn't facing the right way (*Rep.* IX. 518d).

Education is, therefore, the art of enabling others to better themselves. Whether ruling as a benevolent oligarch, as Plato suggests, or as a voting citizen of a democracy, Plato suggests that ruling for the benefit of all requires that one be in harmony with oneself.

The above quote is a reference Plato's famous allegory of the cave, in which we come to have a far deeper understanding of education's importance to him. It is difficult, given the number and complexity of arguments, to be sure what exactly Plato believed to be true and what is written as a matter of Socratic dialogue. It is relatively clear that what Socrates and Plato are using to educate their audience is a dialectic—a robust and full conversation in which the participants are encouraged to forward arguments and consider rebuttals. Like escaping from a cave in which one has lived an entire life, the student is not taught facts, so much as reoriented towards escape from the cave. That escape acts as a means by which to better the life of the learner, and also a means by which to better the lives of all of those whom the learner helps to escape from the cave. This education is interactive, robust, and focused on the betterment of all of the participants.

It is clear that we do not hold many views in common with Plato. Certainly, in the United States, music and physical education—which were essential to effective education—to Plato, are not priorities. If Plato was right, and such education is necessary for healthy, flourishing individuals who are in harmony with themselves and value beauty (and thereby are capable of

ruling justly and benevolently), then education in the U.S. is not geared towards the flourishing of the students (or the rulers). Certainly, one would think that if education in the U.S. were truly oriented towards the best interest of the students themselves, physical and health education would be top priorities in the standardized test regimen. Rather, generally English and mathematics are most heavily prioritized. These subjects are certainly necessary, but necessary for active participation in society. The almost exclusive focus on those two subjects is unlikely to produce a flourishing people. Instead, the focus placed on some subjects like mathematics over the arts, seems to suggest that our educational focus is on the ability to work rather than flourish as a ruler (or voter). It is unusual to see, for example, civics, governance, and governmental philosophy on standardized tests necessary for the achievement of a high school diploma.

Plato's work, then, acts as a stark warning for educational leaders. It is too easy to brush off the *Republic* as a rather old criticism of democracy, a political system dear to our societal heart. Tyranny, Plato warns us, can easily evolve from democracy. It does so specifically because of the kind of freedom democracy allows—one of those freedoms being the freedom to pursue one's own desires without much limitation. What, then, prevents rulers in Plato's ideal state from acting from the same selfish human nature? —It is their education. For Plato it was largely the individual's capacity *to learn* that determines his or her capacity to rule. If he or she has the capacity to be educated effectively, that person then can be a ruler. In our own democracy we are, in fact, the rulers. It is from our own ranks that our rulers come and through us that legislation is passed. If, then, Plato was right, it is paramount that educational leaders constantly push for robust education not just for citizens who can work, but education that acts as a means by which to best prepare all citizens to rule.

The *Second Treatise*, Government, and Education

We might, however, beg to differ with Plato. There is good reason to suggest, given the success of our democracy, that a liberal notion of human nature is better evidenced than such a pessimistic one. The concept of governance in the U.S. is synonymous with the concept of economy. Simply, we have developed, and continue to develop, a notion that individuals, when focused solely on their own best interest, will act in such a way as to benefit the best interest of the community as a whole. This occurs, we believe, not because that person *decides* to benefit society, but, because our interests are likely to compete with each other's, either resulting in a) A

happy medium of neither of us being willing to capitulate to the doing of harm to ourselves, or b) The better of two options emerges victorious through a kind of Darwinian selection of the most fit. Certainly, we hold this to be economically true. We see, though, that we also hold this “betterness is determined through competition” philosophy to be governmentally true. The legal restrictions on who can run for office are invariably focused on the person’s age, citizenship, and, perhaps, law abiding behavior. It is not required, though, that the person have dedicated time to social service, have experience in governance, or demonstrate much in the way of intelligence or morality. Thus, our political system, like our economic system, relies on the basic notion that through competition the most fit to rule will emerge.

Obviously, Plato found that particular notion to be deeply wrong-headed. However, it seems to be one supported by the work of John Locke. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke argued for a democratic government that itself should be oriented towards the best interest of the people. If it fails to meet that best interest, the people have the right to remove that government. Our own notion of governance rests heavily on Locke. His belief in individual rights--particularly the right to life, liberty and property—has informed the US Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The belief that all people are equal and that no one person has the natural right to authority of another is grounded in John Locke’s work. He writes that the state of nature is, “A *state also of equality*, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another” (Locke & MacPherson, 1689/1980, p. 8). It is the grounding in that notion of equality--particularly in the founding documents of the U.S--that has resulted in the gradual legislation of equality for all U.S. citizens, regardless of race, creed, or sex. Certainly, then, it would seem we have little reason to worry about Plato’s concerns and are best served to continue following John Locke’s voice of freedom and equality.

It is here that we see, though, that Plato’s concerns are most relevant. Locke himself is often poorly understood, and certainly misused by those in power. For example, Locke was not writing at a time in which corporation, as we now know it, existed. Certainly, there was no notion that those corporations would hold “personhood” status. Locke’s own work is grounded in the idea that business, largely run by individuals who are the small business owners, is also deeply invested and connected to the needs of its community. Simply, although that business owner may not care about the needs of that community, the needs of the community will impose

themselves on the businessperson by virtue of his closeness to the community. She acts, and thinks, and needs as an individual, but he does so *with other individuals*.

The impact of Locke's conception of human rights and freedom continues to reverberate, forcefully, through U.S. society, particularly in terms of economics. Consider Adams Smith's "invisible hand," a notion I argue emerges from Locke's liberal philosophy. Smith, famous for authoring *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), is often referred to in the media and amongst academics as the founder of economic philosophy in the United States. Certainly, his ideas are essential to the idea the free market, as he argued that individual agents would benefit society by pursuing their own best interest—by seeking to better their own lives economic actors will employ others and participate in economic exchange. Smith's rather robust understanding of market self-regulation is now generally referred to under the catch all "the invisible hand." Anecdotally, however, it seems that his discussion of Smith's philosophy and his "invisible hand" is reduced to the idea that markets need no regulation—as the market will seek equilibrium on its own.

Smith's notion is far more complex than the reduction that is overused today, and thorough discussion of his economic philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to say, however, and economy does not *magically* maintain a balance in the economy such that it minimizes harm for the majority while also maximizes profit. Rather, it does so because each individual person has the voice and capability to address her own best interest, and that best interest, because it is voiced and empowered, prevents the violation of their rights by other individuals as John Locke asserted, and Smith's work, as grounded in much of Locke's philosophy, also maintains.

Now, however, corporations exist that have little connection to their employees, the communities they exist within, and, at times, even to their consumers. It is of little concern, for example, to those of us who purchase Apple electronics that the employees who work for Foxconn in China are mistreated, underpaid, and ignored. The distance—physically, politically, and economically—between the worker and the stockholder is so great that violation of employees' intrinsic Lockian rights has little impact on the corporation's actions. Simply, the invisible hand fails to act to protect the employee because *there is no actual invisible hand*—it was simply a turn of phrase used by Smith to describe the tendency of free markets to self-regulate under certain conditions. Locke argued that regulation and intervention by authorities

was necessary in order to prevent harm, mistreatment, and abuse of individuals (because such actions violate individual's natural rights). Smith's invisible hand is not a thing; it is the general tendency of an economy to balance itself *if all of the agents have equal access to power*—simply to achieve balance if all agents have the ability to *genuinely* pursue their own best interest. Thus, we see the danger of using philosophy without *knowing* philosophy. Today, we reference Lockian notions and those philosophies that emerge from his work as a means by which to justify our social system and economy, yet very few of us know the intricacies of those philosophies. Thus, it is easy for anyone to make claims about the conceptual grounding of our system while the populace lacks the knowledge base necessary to evaluate those claims.

Given the preceding brief discussion of economics, it may seem difficult to see the direct connection between Locke's work and education today. Nonetheless, the connection is there. Locke wrote of natural law in the state of nature: "reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Locke & MacPherson, 1689/1980, p. 9). When such violations occur, "Every man hath a right to punish the offender" (Locke & MacPherson, 1689/1980, p.10). Therefore, the *Treatise* supports the idea that if an individual, or a conglomeration thereof, violates the law of nature, it seems rationally justifiable that the individual punish the offender. As we move out of the state of nature into our social contract as described in Locke's work, it stands to reason that the violated individual, who may have been marginalized, denied his possessions, or experienced personal harm as a result of the actions of others, can expect that the government's judiciary will address and punish the offender. Here, again, we see that it is education that makes possible Locke's notion of government as one must be educated sufficiently to understand the rights of individuals; *one must have consulted the law of nature*.

Simply, Locke's view states that education should again do far more than make sure that students have the ability to work or find a career. Rather, that education would be sufficiently robust to ensure that the students understand their rights, nature, and recourses. Importantly, education would not simply act as a means by which to disseminate the law of nature, but would act as a means by which to ensure that students can and do "consult" that law of nature. Like Plato, education acts as a means by which to direct the learner's gaze towards one's own nature and the understanding of one's own flourishing. Surely, a Lockian notion of governance and

economy cannot succeed if the voter or the buyer does not understand his or her own best self-interest. Moreover, Locke's philosophy, and those that emerge from it like Smith's, can be blatantly, and perhaps maliciously misused, if we do not understand the import and complexities of those philosophies upon which our society is grounded. We cannot pretend, in the U.S. democracy, that it is impossible to indoctrinate, mis-educate, or misinform learners regarding their best interest. If that were the case, we would not be so very critical of communist regimes that institutionalize a required curriculum that teaches students a particularly one-sided view of history.

Thus, we know that education poses as great a danger as it does a boon; it can act as a means by which to direct one's gaze away from one's own best interest or towards it. If Locke is right, then we should be very worried about education in the U.S. today—as it does not act as a means by which to best help learners participate in their own economic best interest. Simply, a liberalistic society, now often understood as a free-market capitalist economy, assumes that we all act in our own economic best interest. If, however, the flaws of human thinking are exploited or consumers are kept ignorant, then the consumer cannot genuinely act in her own best interest. As such, the invisible hand fails, because its action requires that all invested parties do in fact act in their best interest. If corporations find legislative means by which to protect themselves from disclosing the dangers of their products or use behavioral psychology as a means by which to manipulate the consumer, no force is necessary to violate our Lockian natural rights; we will act against those rights either through ignorance or through manipulation. It is that ignorance and miseducation that is of paramount concern to educational leaders.

Plato and Locke's Warning to those who Govern

What is illustrated by these two examples is the ways in which two very different ways of thinking may 1) suggest radically different implementations of education, yet 2) maintain the absolute importance of education in a society. The philosophies of Plato and Locke may differ fundamentally in their view of human capacity to work together when their needs are met. Locke seems to certainly hold more faith that, when given cart blanche, humans will recognize the rights of other individuals. This, of course requires that we are all educated sufficiently such that we recognize those rights and have the recourse necessary to protect violations of those rights by those who might seek to do us harm.

Perhaps the philosophies of these two thinkers can be understood in the terms in which Charles Taylor places some political thought. He argues that there is “L-Stream” thinking (named so for John Locke) and “M-Stream” thinking (named so for Montesquieu). Montesquieu, not so differently from Plato, maintained a notion of humans as political beings. The fundamental difference being that Montesquieu, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, seems to have a far more hopeful view of basic human nature than Plato. Regardless, Plato seems to share the M-Stream notion that humans are social and political beings motivated by more than economic self-interest when he argues that if educated properly and denied wealth, humans will rule benevolently.

Plato’s *Republic* suggests that we are social beings who need to exist together: *if* society is properly ordered we will get along well and work towards a communal good. This is in stark contrast to Locke, who is more focused on an individual’s capacity to seek her own benefit. While Locke is not as pessimistic about human nature as Thomas Hobbes (who describes our lives without governance as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short), Locke and Plato both share a belief that humans are very motivated by their own interests. Again, the difference between them seems to hinge on Plato’s belief that our interest is a social and political one, whereas Locke seems to understand human nature as primarily economic—that we are individuals who must engage other individuals in order to seek our best interest.

In the U.S., we seem to reject Plato’s notion that we are social and we also reject his concerns regarding democracy. We, like Locke, believe that we are primarily economic beings focused on our own best interest. However, it is precisely that kind of person about which Plato warns us and argues that we must use education to protect the whole of society against. What is clear through an examination of the work of Plato and Locke is that without proper education, society collapses, whether under the heel of a tyrant or into headless anarchy. What is also clear is that the ruler, whether the oligarch or the individual voter, must be sufficiently well-educated to understand her needs *and* her needs in the relation to (and often dependent on) the welfare of the rest of society.

Can we genuinely suggest that those things which thinkers like Plato and Locke suggest are essential to and about education are simply unimportant--as we have done with music and civics, when in comparison to the importance of preparing students for “gainful employment?” Certainly, even Locke, market-motivated liberalistic, now often read as capitalistic, thinker that

he was, did not agree that the *fundamental goal of human life was work*. If educational leaders wish to enact policy that both best benefits the learner and society as a whole, they must also be willing to confront the fundamental philosophical questions challenging those policies.

Policy is grounded in philosophy. The recent “Race to the Top” initiative, for example, is grounded in the philosophical notion that competition is good and will benefit everyone. It is, it would seem, an idea John Locke would support. However, a greater understanding of Locke tells us that “Race to the Top” may *not* be in the best interest of society, as the best interests of individuals are only met when those individuals can fairly compete because they are “born to the same advantages of nature.” Children, however, are not born to the same advantages of nature in a society in which some are born into privilege and others born into abject poverty. It might well be, from a Lockian perspective, that this fact itself is a violation of natural law. Certainly, though, we could not suggest that the invisible hand will govern the competition that arises in the “Race to the Top” initiative between students and schools starting from radically different positions and denied equal access to resources.

Further examination from a Platonic standpoint suggests that the supposition of “Race to the Top” –that we are at our best when competing in Darwinian fashion—must be false. Humans, Plato suggests, are lazy, violent, and greedy. Such racing often only leads to less investment in the others with whom we interact. To encourage children to compete for the very basics of education is likely to only groom and encourage the character vices that led to the execution of Socrates—greed and apathy to the needs of others. Plato’s ideal city is certainly not one of equality like Locke’s, but it emphasizes without hesitation the importance of a robust, multiple-decade education for the necessity of flourishing rulers and flourishing individuals. Plato thought we needed rulers *who did not want to be at the top* because they knew that their duty, as fully actualized moral persons, *was to their people*. The irony of our policy is that we require that students race against each other to the top while we also suggest that No Child [is] Left Behind. It takes only a brief philosophical analysis to recognize and explicate why these two policies, particularly in conjunction, must be untenable. The realization becomes that it is not just studies, after the fact, that suggest these policies are not good for students. The problem is that the very philosophical notions upon which Race to the Top and other such initiatives are grounded are notions about which philosophers like Plato and Locke have already warned us.

We see that education, at least as we seem to justify it today in the U.S., violates the basic principles of two of our most esteemed western thinkers. We certainly seem to pick and choose their thoughts as we see fit, ignoring Plato's criticisms and warping Locke's work unrecognizably. If administrators and educational leaders are to combat initiatives that clearly do not act in the best interest of students, we must know why. Often, we cannot justify our disagreement with social trends or politicians' pandering initiatives until a decade or more of research suggests that students have been harmed by those initiatives. For those students, it is too late. Additionally, the basic philosophy that grounded those initiatives, is now, a decade later, part of our social psyche, having burrowed itself into our consciousness and is now nearly impossible to dislodge. We need evidence to combat policy that is based on poor philosophy *before it is enacted*; thus, we need philosophy.

We need a means by which to combat prevailing social beliefs (philosophies) that have become entrenched, warped, or misunderstood, and thus, again we need philosophy. If we really wish to enact policy that benefits students, and stop policy that harms them, we must address more than policy, we must change the way students, parents, politicians, and society as a whole *think* about policy—in other words, we must do *philosophy*. Otherwise, we as a society will continue to move from initiative to initiative, policy to policy, heedlessly, considering only their potential benefits to society without reflecting on the grounding principles and the notions from which they emerge. It is therefore the onus of educational administrators and leaders to delve deeply into the philosophy of the past and the present in order to effectively guide us into a future of informed governance by benevolent and thoughtful persons.

References

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